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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to classify the types of errors Arabs make with definiteness in English and to count the rate of occurrence of each. To accomplish this, 16 three-hour American history final examinations written by Arabic speakers at the University of Texas at Austin were examined. This discussion is limited to the four categories (out of 24) in which 89% (numbering 509) of the errors occurred. The first category (in which the largest number of errors occurred) includes occurrences in which no article stands where "the" is appropriate and in which the noun phrase of which it is a part is ungrammatical. In the category with the second largest number of errors, "the" stands where no article is appropriate, although this is not necessary for grammaticality in the noun phrase; the string or sentence is not semantically justified by the larger context; and/or the sentence is "foreign-sounding." In the third largest category, no article stands where "a" is required, and the noun phrase is ungrammatical. In the fourth largest category, no article stands where "the" is appropriate, the string or sentence is not semantically justified, and/or the sentence is "foreign-sounding." (RM)

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Definiteness Problems in the Written English of Arabic Speakers: A Taxonomy With Partial Explanation

Anyone who has taught English to Arabic speakers knows that definiteness is a problem for them. We hear and read such sentences as:

Franklin Roosevelt was nominated for presidency.

Truman formed committee on civil rights.

Wilson formed the league of the nations.

Rayburn was elected as a speaker of the house.

The point of this paper is to classify the types of errors Arabs make with definiteness and to count the rate of occurrence of each. I have done this by examining a corpus of 16 three hour American history final examinations written by Arabic speakers at the University of Texas at Austin.

I have classified the problems in 24 categories including subtypes and sub-subtypes. There are a total of 574 occurrences in the corpus. However, a major portion, 509, or about 89%, occur in only four categories. I will limit this discussion, then to these four major types of error.

The largest single category, with 235 occurrences, is what I have designated in my larger study¹ as Type 1-A. Two criteria are required for a string to be included here--Ø stands where "the" is appropriate and the noun phrase of which it is a part is ungrammatical. Two examples are:

The effect of new deal on society

the change was result of

[or Def 2-A]

¹"An Analysis of the Written English of Native Speakers of Arabic as Found in American History Final Examinations Given at the University of Texas at Austin." Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Texas at Austin. 1972.

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The first of these could be made grammatical by changing $\emptyset$ to "the" or "a" but only "the" in the context, is semantically reasonable. Where context does not show use of the definite article to be clearly the correct choice of words, as with the second example, I have indicated an alternative choice in brackets at the end of the line. The designation [or Def 2-A] means that the definiteness category 2-A where $\emptyset$ stands for "a" is another reasonable way to understand the problem. On the sheet which shows the total distribution of definiteness problems, I have indicated occurrences of alternate categorization in the ranks marked with asterisks.

In type 1-A, 235 occurrences do not require alternate explanations and 30 do require them.

More examples of Type 1-A are:

the poor area of Tennessee Valley

the old idea of unseen hand

[or Def 2-A]

this helps poor American

While this kind of problem is the most widely occurring one in my sample, it is, alas, not one which has been treated in the literature of contrastive analysis. (This does not, of course, necessarily mean that a good contrastive analysis could not explain it.) And I have no explanation of my own to offer. Other kinds of problems, as I will indicate later, have been explained on the basis of contrastive analysis rather thoroughly.

The second most numerous type of error (120 occurrences) is what I have designated as Type 3-B. Criteria for inclusion in this class are:

—"The" stands where $\emptyset$ is appropriate, though not required for grammaticality in the noun phrase.

- The sentence in which this occurs is not semantically justified by the larger context, and/or
- The sentence is "foreign sounding."

Examples of this kind of problem are:

he went to the war

a big sector of the American opinion

Most members of this group are, like the first example, semantically unsuitable when viewed as part of a larger discourse. "He" in the example refers to Franklin Roosevelt. It is apparent in context that the student is trying to say that FDR commenced a war.

The other example is of a type which occurs much less frequently. The criterion by which it is included here--it's "foreign sounding"--is the criterion most likely to horrify (rather than benumb). In part this unhappy phrase is just a confession that something is wrong with such strings but I don't know exactly what. This intuitive kind of judgment is something I have used unflinchingly in my study, on the ground that it would be better to include items which do not incur universal disapproval or which cannot be precisely described by me than to omit those which I personally apprehend as exotic.

I have found in a 1969 article by Robin Lakoff some justification for my distinction between A and B types of problems, i.e., between those strings which even in isolation are clearly ungrammatical and those which ultimately wind up in the junk-heap of "foreign sounding." In many cases, she writes, "one need know only the superficial form of the sentence in question to determine grammaticality." Very often, however, great importance attaches to context, the speaker's attitude, and what information the speaker and hearer share.

"In these cases . . . any of several variants of a sentence, out of context, will be completely grammatical--but in the specific context only one is correct. No rule can be given the learner to enable him to learn the correct distinctions; in these situations a rule, to be of use, must provide the environment in which it applies--and in these cases the relevant environment is generally implicit, rather than overtly present in another part of the sentence Distinctions of this sort . . . are probably the hardest things to learn in the syntax of another language."²

And in my own experience they have been one of the hardest things to explain meaningfully about one's own language.

To get the type of problem in focus again, here are a few more examples:

The Iron was being used more
to open the trade with Japan
and return to the normal production

This type of problem is predicted in the 1968 dissertation by Ahmad Qafisheh.³ Many of these phrases have as heads mass nouns such as "warfare," "production," and "mass nouns in M.S.A., whether used in a qualified or a non-specified sense, take the article prefix." (p. 114). It is not possible in Arabic to contrast, for example, "The milk is nutritious" with "Milk is nutritious." Only the first form can occur. Perhaps students had this rule of Arabic syntax in mind when they wrote

²"Transformational Grammar and Language Teaching" Language Learning, 19, Nos. 1 and 2 (1969), 123.

³"English Pre-Nominal Modifiers and Corresponding Modern Standard Arabic Structures: A Contrastive Analysis." Michigan.

A-2 Germany got into the unrestricted submarine warfare

C-8 led lately to the overproduction

D-4 The Iron was being used more and

Qafisheh points out further that abstract nouns, such as "philosophy," normally take the definite article in Modern Standard Arabic.

This rule could result in statements like

I-5 he restore the prosperity [and V 1-A]

P-5 14 points concerning the world peace

The third explanatory contrast is that nominalized verbal forms normally take the definite article in Modern Standard Arabic. "An Arab student will tend to produce . . . *the living in freedom and *the speaking well" (p. 114). In Def 3-B we find

I-3 to restore the purchase power [and either V 6 or Adj I]

P-6 of the farming

These entries are, however, the only two examples of this type of interference.

A few other entries in Def 3-B are explained by the fact that

Plural count nouns used in a general (generic) sense, do not take the article in English, but they do so in M.S.A.:

[sic] This also gives rise to serious errors on the production level: *the books are useful instead of books are useful and *the children are innocent instead of children are innocent (p. 113).

In the corpus we see

I-5 Avoided the wars

O-4 to keep out of the Japanese affairs

Often it is difficult if not impossible to isolate one of these areas of interference as the particular agent of confusion. In

C-8 led lately to the overproduction did the writer understand "overproduction" as a mass noun, or perhaps as a nominalized verbal form? One cannot know, but with so many opportunities for error, little short of a miracle could prevent what is illustrated here.

The third category I wish to discuss is Type 2-A. Here Ø stands where "a" is appropriate and the noun phrase in which this occurs is ungrammatical. Examples are:

FDR was great politician

so the government must be servant of the state [or Def 1-A]

Carnegie was strong fellow

he was fat and slow moving person

There are a total of 86 occurrences of this type - 69 where no alternate correction is suggested, 17 with an alternate.

Qafisheh offers a simple prediction/explanation for this kind of problem.

In English, the indefinite article is used in indefinite references, to an item or person not in the field of focus, i.e., not previously mentioned, and not unique in the context. In M.S.A. [Modern Standard Arabic] Ø is selected before a singular indefinite common noun. On the production level since English has a matching Ø, an Arab student will tend to omit the article in singular construction.⁴

⁴Qafisheh, pp. 111, 112.

Most of the items in 2-A do involve singular constructions. This reasoning accounts for another, smaller category in addition to Type 2-A-- it predicts the errors recorded in 2-B. In it (2-B) the same kind of problem occurs but the result is not ungrammatical, just contextually unjustified. There are a total of 14 items recorded there. The two categories together make up a little under 1/6 of the total errors recorded.

The last major category is Type 1-B. In it--Ø stands where "the" is appropriate, though not required for grammaticality in the noun phrase.

--The sentence is not semantically justified by the larger context and/or,

--The sentence is foreign sounding.

Examples are:

He thought that depression was due to the World situation at that time.

There was a great collapse in American economy.

was opposed by American people.

In the first example "depression" without the definite article may be construed as indicating the psychological state, or perhaps as all occurrences of that specific type of economic disruption; but certainly not as the particular events of the 1930's.

In the second "economy" seems to refer to American habits of thrift.

The third is of that sort relegated to the "foreign sounding" type.

As with Type 1-A there is nothing in the literature of contrastive analysis to explain the occurrence of this problem

One question remains and that is the matter of how far one should generalize from this sample. The corpus is what is called an availability sample, i.e., it's all I could get. Moreover, I happily assign examination

of a larger corpus to someone else, hopefully someone young enough and healthy enough to have adequate years of life in which to do it.

Figure 1

Criteria and Examples of Major Types

Type 1-A

Criteria

- Ø stands where "the" is appropriate
- the noun phrase of which it is a part is ungrammatical

Examples

- The effect of new deal on society
- the change was result of [or Def. 2-A]
- the poor area of Tennessee Valley
- the old idea of unseen hand [or Def. 2-A]
- this helps poor American

Type 3-B

Criteria

- "The" stands where Ø is appropriate though not necessary for grammaticality in the noun phrase.
- The string (or sentence in which it occurs) is not semantically justified by the larger context, and/or
- The sentence is "foreign sounding."

Examples

- He went to the war.
- a big sector of the American opinion
- The Iron was being used more.
- to open the trade with Japan
- and return to the normal production
- Germany got into the unrestricted submarine warfare
- led lately to the overproduction
- he restore the prosperity [and V 1-A]
- 14 points concerning the world peace
- to restore the purchase power [and V 6]
- of the farming
- Avoided the wars
- to keep out of the Japanese affairs

Type 2-A

Criteria

- Ø stands where 'a' is required
- The noun phrase is ungrammatical

Examples

- F.D.R. was great politician
- so the government must be servant of the state
- he was fat and slow moving person
- Wilson took hardline
- strike out in new direction [or Noun 1-A]

Type 1-B

Criteria

- Ø stands where 'the' is appropriate.
- The string (or sentence in which it occurs) is not semantically justified, and/or
- The sentence is 'foreign sounding.'

Examples

- He thought that depression was due to the World situation at that time.
- There was a great collapse in American economy.
- was opposed by American people
- in order to go ahead with war
- and took part in Nations politics

Figure 2

Distribution of Definiteness Problems

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	TOTAL	COMBINED TOTAL
1-A	6	16	15	4	1	6	28	17		10	12	13	43	3	21	225	235	
1-A*	5	1	4	1	2	2		2	1	2		5	3		2	30		
1-B	3	3	18	2	5	4		6	1	1	6	4	2	9		4	68	68
1-B*																		
2-A	5	4	6	6	5		3	3	5	3	5	5	8	8	1	2	69	86
2-A*	1	1			1	1		1	1		2		4	3		2	17	
2-B			2		2		1			1	1						7	14
2-B*			5	1	1												7	
3-A				1	1		1	1	1			1	1		2		9	9
3-A*																		
3-B	3	2	15	10	14		2	10	17	3	7	11		6	8	5	113	
3-B*					4		1		1							1	7	120
4-A			1		1			1	1					2			6	7
4-A*								1									1	
4-B			2	1	2		2	2	1						1		11	17
4-B*		1		1				1				1	2				6	
5-A							1										1	2
5-A*								1									1	
5-B		1									1						2	7
5-B*		1		1				1				1	1				5	
6			2		1	1		1	1								6	6
6*																		
7			1											2			3	3
7*																		
TOTAL	17	26	62	30	35	6	16	52	47	8	30	33	24	70	15	32	500	
TOTAL*	6	4	9	4	8	3	1	7	3		4	2	12	6		5	74	
COMBINED TOTAL	23	30	71	34	43	9	17	59	50	8	34	35	36	76	15	37	574	

* with alternative descriptions